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UNCLAS HARARE 002835

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TAGS: ECON EPET EFIN ETRD AMGT ZI

SUBJECT: Harare's Fuel Lines: It's Not Pretty

Ref: Harare 2809

11. Summary: An informal poll of Embassy staff today indicates that it remains very difficult to obtain fuel in Harare. Nonetheless, several stations are pumping and vehicles on the road have increased from approximately 25 to 50 percent of normal. End Summary.

12. Local staff say it has taken from 2-24 hours in line to purchase fuel over the past few days. Many leave cars unattended in gas lines and pay local "touts" to contact them when the precious stuff arrives. There are reports of frustratingly-long unfruitful stints. Here's what a few local employees told us today:

"This morning I had to pass through one of the few service stations which had the precious liquid to give a friend some food. He slept there last night having joined the queue at about 3:00 pm yesterday. When I saw him at seven in the morning he had been in that one place for sixteen hours. For the whole time there was no fuel. It was expected at about eight o'clock this morning. The fuel station as is expected, is owned by a member of the ruling regime."

"Last Sunday I waited for 5 hours at a service station but got nothing. A lot of people are waiting for under two hours and getting nothing."

"Some of my colleagues have had to spend the whole night at these queues hoping that fuel will be delivered the next day. On average one would need to spend 12 to 18 hours queuing for the precious liquid."

"I have been looking for diesel since Saturday last week. I spent 3 hours on Saturday and the product ran out two cars before I could be served. On Sunday, I spent 2 hours at [one station] and another 3 hours at [another station] and again diesel ran out before I could be served. The same story happened on Tuesday and Wednesday night after work."

Note: The Embassy sells fuel to employees, but at about 10-fold the local subsidized price. For that reason, many employees still try to procure it on the economy.

Comment

13. It seems every Zimbabwean motorist has a fresh battle story to tell. Parastatal NOCZIM is importing fuel but unable to satisfy the heavy pent-up demand. Black-market transactions are becoming more common, public transport is sketchy and taxis have begun to charge about 5-times the normal fare. We will continue to track this important issue.

Sullivan